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181207Z Nov 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002031

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV AM

SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S REFERENDUM NOT QUITE ON THE RIGHT TRACK?

REF: A) YEREVAN 1994 B) YEREVAN 1993

Classified By: CDA A.F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) While Armenia's leaders state they are committed to running a clean referendum on November 27, some recent actions call this into question. The GOAM has decided to permit no international observers except those from the Council of Europe and it is pulling out all the stops to promote a "yes" vote, including requiring teachers and other government employees to use official resources to get out the vote. While we watch these developments with concern, we are not yet entirely ready to write off Armenia's prospects to do the right thing in the upcoming constitutional referendum.
End Summary.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS NEED NOT APPLY

12. (C) With the exception of a limited number of Council of Europe observers that National Assembly Speaker Bagdasarian invited earlier this year, the GOAM has declined to invite OSCE observers despite personal appeals by numerous senior-level, member-state officials and Congressman Hastings (ref A). While local Armenian NGOs have been able to register as observers, the lack of what the Armenian public perceives as generally impartial, international observers will seriously undermine any GOAM attempt to portray the upcoming referendum as fully free and fair. NDI and IFES, both of whom routinely monitor local and other elections in Armenia, have both failed to garner authorization to monitor the November 27 referendum.

MINISTERS PUSH HARD FOR A "YES" VOTE

13. (C) Minister of Foreign Affairs Oskanian and Minister of Agriculture Lokian lobbied hard for the proposed constitution during a meeting with a group of 400 Armenian farmers that was heavily covered by Armenian media. The ministers linked successful passage of the proposed constitutional amendments to a potential Millennium Challenge Corporation compact (which would be expected to include significant rural infrastructure projects). Public officials have taken every opportunity to urge Armenians to vote "yes" in the upcoming November 27 referendum.

OPPOSITION LOOKING TO TAKE CREDIT FOR APATHY

14. (C) After several months of dithering about whether to urge Armenians to vote "no" or to boycott the referendum, opposition leaders seemed to discover that they could boost their perceived popularity by claiming that each registered voter who does not show up on November 27 is actually one of their loyal supporters. Now all the various opposition factions have moved to calling for a boycott. Opposition think-tanker Shahnazarian told us in September that the only "logical" move was to call for a boycott since most voters wouldn't bother voting and that the opposition wasn't in a position to mobilize people to vote "no." Shahnazarian also noted that potential fraud would be easier to detect if participation levels in the referendum were clearly too low to make the vote valid. Self-appointed father of the new Armenian constitution and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Tigran Torosian has tried to limit the opportunities for the opposition to claim support if people didn't go to the polls in great numbers on the 27th. Torosian recently pointed out that the opposition would try to claim the people who were indifferent to any election as their allies, "However, (the opposition needs) to be reminded that 45 percent of the voters usually do not vote, so when they make their calculations in the end, they need to remove this 45 percent from the number of voters that did not participate and not count them in favor of the opposition." What

Torosian failed to note in his remarks, however, was that if fewer than two-thirds of the electorate participates in the vote, then the referendum will fail.

COMMENT: THERE'S STILL TIME TO RUN A CLEAN REFERENDUM

15. (C) Although the GOAM's promotion of the proposed package of amendments has gone well beyond the merely zealous (ref B), with verified accounts of public school teachers receiving instructions to not only vote, but to vote to approve the amendments, and with the GOAM sending (no-cost) text messages to all cellphone subscribers in Armenia to urge them to vote "yes," the GOAM still has the chance to run a clean referendum, were they to so choose. By keeping international observers at bay, however, the GOAM appears to be setting the stage for an outcome that no one will be in a position to certify as "free and fair" even were it to be so.

GODFREY